REHABILITATED - RESTORED - REBORN

April 14, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Acts 3:1-10
John 21:1-17

"'...do you love me?... Feed my sheep.'"
-John 21:17 (NSRV)

Most of us live most of the time somewhere between our expectations of ourselves and the simple, unvarnished reality of our lives. We know, most of us do, the pain which results when we fail to live up to the expectations others have of us - our parents, teachers, mentors, peers - and that deeper pain, perhaps the most profound pain of all, when we fail to live up to our own expectations of ourselves.

Have you not been there?

A long time ago there used to be a day when parents were invited to visit elementary school. It was called Parents' Day and students looked forward to it with a wide range of feelings from excitement to mortal terror. The high point of the afternoon on Parents' Day one year was to be a spelling bee. It was the fourth or fifth grade. I had been doing very well in spelling bees, finishing regularly near the top. Unfortunately I had announced that fact to my mother. In fact I had promised a repeat performance which would make her proud on visiting day. The moment arrived. Supremely confident, I found my place near the head of the line (my last name always placing me near the front). The easy words came first: the first one was "acre." I responded with the full confidence of a nine-year-old - "a..c..e..r." I remember that moment with a terrible clarity decades later.

Have you not been there? Of course you have.

If you have great expectations, you have known great disappointment. If you have ever wanted desperately to win, you know how bitter defeat tastes. If you have held high hopes for your nation, your team, your family, yourself, you have known how deeply the pain penetrates when hopes are dashed. [See Ernest T. Campbell, Locked in a Room With Open Doors, p. 151]

There was a classic moment after one of Adlai Stevenson's crushing defeats in his presidential bids. A reporter asked how it felt to be defeated so decisively. Mr.Stevenson said he was "too old to cry but it hurt too much to laugh."

And people who preach sermons understand the story about the minister who traveled to another city to preach a candidate sermon for the pulpit

committee of a very prominent church. When she returned that evening her husband inquired how the sermon had gone. "Which one"" she asked. "The one I prepared, the one I delivered, or the one I preached in the car on the way home?"

This pain has two sources. The first is public embarrassment. It hurts to try something and fail, to be humiliated in front of your parents, peers, your employer, coach, conductor, spouse. The jury is in. The terrible truth is out. You're not what they thought you were. It hurts - but it's not fatal. You'll survive.

The second source is more complicated. It has to do with your expectations of yourself. Maybe you didn't have much by way of expectations for yourself; didn't think you could do much. And maybe it took a while and some real internal fortitude to have some real expectations that you might succeed. Maybe you had to work hard to build enough confidence to give it a try. Maybe you created an expectation for yourself higher than anything you ever hoped for. You started to believe that you could do it. And then you didn't. The moment of truth arrived and you didn't do what you set out to do so confidently: your carefully rehearsed rebuttal to the argument didn't come out right; you stuttered in the middle of the sales presentation; you struck out with the winning run on third; or you never parented in actuality as sensitively and intelligently as you did late at night when you thought about it. There is pain which results from not living up to your own expectations. It has a way of becoming permanent, low-grade pain, emotional scar tissue, if you will. And it has a way of suggesting a method of avoiding further pain; namely a reduction of expectations, a lowering of self-image, a diminishment of hope. Better not to expect too much of myself, we reason; then I won't be disappointed when I fail.

Most of us live most of the time between our expectations of ourselves and the unvarnished reality of our lives. And in that space there can be a lot of pain. It is one of the reasons we find the story of Peter so compelling. He is, in many ways, the most accessible person in the New Testament. And the account, in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John, of his encounter with the risen Christ is, I have always thought, one of the most human, and therefore one of the most powerful, incidents in the Bible. It is certainly one which most of us have no trouble understanding.

American novelist, Reynolds Price, writing in a book of essays about the Bible, says this passage at the end of the 4th Gospel has the feel of eyewitness reporting.

> "There are hundreds of invented scenes in Western fiction that win our momentary belief. But nothing I have encountered in a lifetime's reading, surpasses the simple conviction, the pure-water flow of John 21." [Incarnation, p. 64]

The story of Peter is woven into the narrative from the beginning. What we know is that he was a Galilean fisherman, strong, rough; he had a wife, a family, a mother-in-law; he was aggressive, impetuous; he frequently spoke first and thought about it later; he became the leader, the spokesperson for the disciples, and with Paul, became an eloquent and strong ambassador for Jesus Christ and was responsible for the extension and growth of Christianity. What we know about Peter is his humanness. He

was a man with a heart full of love and a record of not living up to his own expectations.

When Jesus invited him to follow, Peter did, without hesitation. He was one of those the narrative says simply, "laid down his nets and followed." Along with James and John he became part of an unofficial inner circle of close friends around Jesus. When Jesus asked them one day who they thought he was, it was Peter who volunteered, "you are the Christ," and moments later it was Peter who demonstrated the difficulty the world has always had with that affirmation by refusing to accept the inevitability of Christ's suffering and death. And so it was to Peter that Jesus said his harshest words, "Get behind me Satan."

He was on the mountain with Jesus and shared an experience of mystical power and then made a tasteless suggestion that they build a monument to the place and occasion. He was the one who voiced his emotion and objected when Jesus washed their feet. On that occasion, the Last Supper, it is Peter who demanded to know the identity of the betrayer. And when Jesus predicted that they would all abandon him soon, it was Peter, bursting with passion and love, who promised bravely, "Though everyone abandon you, I am with you to the end. I will die with you." That grand gesture prompted Jesus to predict that, in actuality, Peter is going to abandon him too. In fact, Peter will deny even knowing Jesus three times before morning.

When the guards come for Jesus it is Peter alone who resisted, who drew his sword and started to use it. That, I have always thought, was the moment he would have died for Jesus, in the heat of combat, man to man.

Hours later, Peter alone is in the courtyard of the High Priest while Jesus is inside, being interrogated and tried. It is late and cold. There is a charcoal fire. A household maid recognizes him. "You're one of them, aren't you?" "I am not," Peter said.

Later, someone else asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" "I am not," Peter said.

"But I saw you in the garden - you were the one with the sword."

"Damn it, man, let me alone. I never saw him before," Peter said.

And the cock crowed and when they brought Jesus out, his face swollen from the beating, hands bound behind his back, their eyes must have met, the last time Peter would look into those eyes.

He did not die with Jesus. He did not stay with him. He did what the rest of them did ultimately, saved his own skin, denied ever knowing Jesus. How very far from his brave boasting, his endearing attempt at courage, his idealistic expectation of himself.

Peter must have experienced the pain of Jesus' crucifixion more exquisitely and certainly more personally than any other human being in history. Can you imagine the guilt, the shame, the embarrassment? Can you imagine how foolish he felt in the presence of his friends who at least had the common sense not to boast about something they could not deliver? Peter, I suspect, was filled to the brim with guilt and self-disgust.

So it is Peter who says, "I'm going fishing." Translate that... I'll do something I know how to do. I'll go back to the life I left, the predictable, secure, low-expectation, existence of a fisherman.

If you have ever enjoyed the luxury of a dawn walk on the beach, you know that it is a peculiar time, almost mystical. The ocean is often quiet in the early morning. There are a few gulls, usually a misty fog which makes it difficult to see the horizon. There are no colors yet; everything is a soft, pale gray.

A voice breaks the silence:

"Boys," the voice says. "Lads" - it is an intimate term - "you aren't catching anything, are you? Try the other side."

"Who was that?" one asked, in the boat, annoyed, startled, and another one whispered, "It looks like him!"

And now Peter, working hard, stripped to the waist, dives in and swims the hundred yards to shore.

There is a charcoal fire, as there was in the courtyard. He offers fish and bread. The writer wisely does not describe what they said as they ate, therefore leaving the impression that they said nothing - just stood there around the fire, eating bread; looking down at their feet, shifting their weight from one foot to the other - waiting... And Peter standing there with them, having again done something brash and impetuous, dripping wet in the chill air, shivering in spite of his attempts to be calm and strong. And finally their eyes meet again and Jesus, speaking to him, asks: "Do you love me more than these?" It is, I think, a gentle teasing. "Do you actually love me more than these others do?"

And Peter, damned by the reality of his denial, three times, does not boast any longer. "You know that I love you" is all he can think to say.

He denied Jesus three times; failed to live up to his own expectations three times. So three times the question comes.

"Do you love me?" And three times the humble response, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you."

And three times, the charge, the commission -

"Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep."

Peter spoke and acted bravely. In the first lesson we heard about his bold witness in Jerusalem. Peter became what he wanted to be. And he was faithful to the end. He died, as his Lord died, tradition has it, crucified.

But here, in the pale gray light of dawn, a devastated, guilty, human being who is familiar to every one of us is Rehabilitated - Restored - Reborn.

Reynolds Price asks:

> "How can a rational life yield to an old and preposterous pamphlet which asks no less than a seismic change of mind and heart?" And then answers with this story, "...the scene that most defeats my doubts, that bears the homeliest signs of straight reporting." [Ibid., p. 65]

It is the undeniable humanness of this story (we have all been there) and the miracle of grace and rebirth. Jesus doesn't criticize Peter, doesn't even mention his miserable behavior, doesn't multiply Peter's guilt by calling attention to the obvious, instead demonstrates the saving power of unconditional love. Forgiveness, acceptance, restoration, are the first results of Easter.

And that, I propose, is very good news indeed.

You don't have to live out of your past.

You don't have to live out of your near misses or colossal failures.

You don't have to go on living out of your sin.

You don't have to live out of the shame you feel because you've never been able to live up to the expectations others have imposed on you - or your expectations of yourself.

You are loved - forgiven - restored - and if you will grasp this: if you will stand there with that so very human fisherman, on the beach in the early morning light, with nothing to offer but your crushed hopes for yourself, your intentions, your unrealized expectations, your love, you will be welcomed and reborn.

How good it would be to stop now; to end this sermon with gracious acceptance and love all around, to sing "Just As I Am... O Lamb of God, I come..."

The trouble is the incident doesn't end here.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord. You know I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

The difference between self-fulfillment in the secular sense, and what the Christian faith means by salvation is here. Jesus forgives Peter and in the forgiving "enabled" Peter to forgive himself, accept himself, maybe even love himself again. That's what we want from the therapist. But there is another dimension when Jesus is involved. It's called feeding the sheep.

Fred Buechner wrote once:

> "This is why we try to make the tomb as secure as we can. Because this is what he always says. 'Feed my sheep... my lambs.' This is what we would make ourselves secure from, knowing the terrible needs of

the lambs and our abundance, knowing our own terrible need." [The Magnificent Defeat, p. 81]

So the point of this is not simply feeling good about ourselves again in spite of falling short of our self-expectation. The point of this is a new being, created in the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, and committed to the tasks of feeding the sheep.

..."the terrible needs of the lambs," Buechner put it. You don't have to look far for lambs that need feeding, sheltering, nurturing, loving. All you have to do is lift your eyes and see the human beings who need help - lift your eyes to pictures of Kurdish children dying of dehydration in a sea of mud, the lambs of Jesus in refugee encampments, in ghettoes, in jail cells, dropped into garbage shutes, in nursing homes, on city streets, in your apartment building, in your home.

It's not that there aren't plenty of sheep to feed, nor ways to do it -

* an offering on a Sunday morning,

* a program to tutor youngsters,

* a shelter for the homeless, clothes for the naked, a refuge for the abused, a center for the troubled and alone.

The point is not merely feeling better about ourselves, nor is the point merely engaging in doing good and showing mercy. The point is both. The point is becoming a new being - in Christ.

And it begins when, like Peter, we acknowledge our nakedness, when we know that standing before him we have little to commend us. But nevertheless there we stand, shivering in the cool, gray light of dawn.

And when, like Peter, we know that he accepts us, forgives us, welcomes us...

And when, like Peter, we connect that miracle of love and grace with the tasks and responsibilities of living for others - which is always, living for him.

That's what Christianity is - the love of Jesus, and taking care of the lambs.

"Do you love me?"

"Lord, you know everything, you know we love you."

"Feed my sheep."

It's as simple as that.

Amen.